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Editorial

VITALIZING THEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

What should biblical training seek to accomplish? We need to ask ourselves this fundamental question repeatedly, for we easily lose our perspective. We are so constituted that the secondary good is always likely to be more influential than the primary. We are more enthusiastic for our sect than we are for our religion, for our men's club than for our church, for our red and blue classes than for our Sunday school. Similarly, we are in danger of unnecessarily distorting the perspective of religious education.

The chief aim of the study of the Bible is religious. That seems self-evident. With the aid of the Scriptures we seek to know more about God and duty and immortality. But it is a far cry from Jericho to the heavenly Jerusalem, and even farther from the analyses of the Pentateuch to the gospel that is a power of God unto salvation. Theoretically scientific study of the Bible should make a man increasingly enthusiastic for the deeper things of the spirit. Practically we are in danger of letting the secondary good crowd out the primary, of thinking that the chief end of scholarly biblical study is scholarly results.

It is no new danger to which we are exposed. The entire history of theology is a commentary on the displacement of emphasis and the atrophy of spiritual life that result from centering of attention upon the process of discovering and formulation of religious truth. Profound systems of theology have not always prevented men from killing their fellow-Christians in the interests of uniformity in belief, and a pundit-like knowledge of the Scripture has not always prevented an ever-increasing decay of sympathy in human lives and human needs.

Is the chief end of a theological education to teach men the Bible or to teach them how to use its teachings for the salvation of human life, the abolition of fear, and the reconciliation of man to his God? Every thoughtful person must choose the latter alternative, and yet in the average theological seminary small attention is given to the actual application of the findings of scholarship to the spiritual life. So-called training-schools and Young Men's Christian Associations are wiser in their generation than the average theological faculty. Their methods of study are very possibly inferior, so far as scholarship goes, but such schools make serious attempts to teach their students how to use the Scripture in religious work. Theological seminaries, it is true, have their chairs of homiletics and pastoral duties, with an occasional course or two on religious education. But in too much of their work there is a persistent tendency to stop with information, rather than to go on to the actual application of truth to life. Classes in exegesis regard their work finished when they have found the precise meaning of the Scripture. Classes in theology are content to memorize a system. The great messages of the prophets, of the apostles, and of Jesus himself are not discussed as having bearing upon life, but as so much historical or literary material.

Far be it from any man to belittle the painstaking scientific procedure with which scholars seek after truth. We want our theological teachers to be as scholarly and as scientific as those in any branch of education. We need today a strong ministry; we must have ministers who know the best thought and methods of the theological world. We cannot state this too strongly. But one great reason why some men do not enter the ministry, and others abandon the ministry after they have entered it, is that they do not see the precise bearing of research upon life. They become laboratory investigators rather than physicians, at a time when the world is vastly more in need of having truth applied to life than of getting more truth to apply. If the unfortunate antithesis should ever arise between the search for truth and the application of truth—and we may well pray that it shall never arise—a sense of the needs of society and the individual would prompt a good many of us to choose to apply the truth we already have rather than to search for more.

The matter is one of the utmost significance in an age of theological

transition. The only theological reconstruction that ever amounted to much in the history of the church has been that worked out in the region of life rather than merely in the classroom. Perhaps it is for this reason that so many of the formatively progressive men in theology have been pastors rather than professors in seminaries. And in the region of theological science proper those men have been the most influential teachers who have most deeply felt the need of treating Christian truth in its relation to life, rather than from the point of view of truth as such. They have been practical rather than academic.

The greatest reformation that is needed in our theological schools at the present time is not the increase of electives or any so-called enrichment of the course, important as each may be. It is rather a vitalizing of scholarship. Biblical study has its scientific aspects, but science is only introductory. The minister should be taught to use truth quite as truly as he should be taught what truth is. And that means—to use a word borrowed from another department of training—a radical readjustment of courses along clinical lines. Every seminary should teach its students to put truth at work by putting the students themselves at work. Their growing technical knowledge of various theological disciplines and notably of the Bible should be supplemented and made dynamic by experience. The theological student, instead of being given aid for reaching grades of scholarship, should be paid for the application of his work in churches, Sunday schools, and missions. And this service should not be regarded as something outside of theological training, but as a part of such training. It should be so correlated with the work in the classroom as, on the one side, not to fatigue the student, and to interfere with his largest efficiency, and, on the other hand, to become really educational in that it increases his actual efficiency. For why should a premium be put on a theological student's scholarship? Why not rather respect his total efficiency?

One of the greatest dangers in the religious world at present is the divorce of practical religious workers from scientifically trained students. It is this that begets suspicion on the part of the rank and file of our churches of our entire theological training. It is that which prompts men to go into the ministry without the slightest conception of those methods which have proved successful in other branches of

human activity. If we are to make friends through the appeal to the intellect we must train our men thoroughly in the analysis of documents, the methods of exegesis, the views of various theologians, and the history of Christianity. Clinics always presuppose knowledge. But in addition we must give manual training in religion. A theological school in which each student, be he never so good, has not at some time caught the passion for evangelizing the world, has not been moved to sacrifice himself in the interests of his fellows, has never been swept by the ambition to follow his Lord over Calvary, one in which he has been tempted to substitute scholastic ambitions for those of the prophet, and from which he has been graduated without any practical training in the application of Christian truth to human life —such a school, be its instruction never so scientific, its teachers never so acute, and its student body never so self-satisfied with its teaching, is failing in its duty to the world to which it owes service.